

SCREENING OF NEISSERIAL VACCINE CANDIDATES AND VACCINES
AGAINST PATHOGENIC NEISSERIA

The present invention relates to vaccines for Pathogenic *Neisseria*, and particularly but not exclusively to a screening system for the identification of CD4⁺ T-cell stimulating vaccines in Pathogenic *Neisseria*.

The term "vaccine candidates" is used to refer to peptides which may prove, upon further study, to exhibit some form of vaccine property. In particular, the vaccine candidates discussed below are peptides which stimulate CD4⁺ T-cells (T-cells with CD4 marker on them).

The generic name Pathogenic *Neisseria* covers the pathogenic organisms *Neisseria meningitidis* and *Neisseria gonorrhoea*.

Neisseria meningitidis (the meningococcus) causes meningitis and overwhelming septicaemia that can kill within hours. It also causes outbreaks of meningococcal disease. *Neisseria gonorrhoea* (the gonococcus) causes gonorrhoea and other invasive diseases, e.g. pelvic inflammatory diseases and septic arthritis.

Although the two neisserial species (*N. meningitidis* and *N. gonorrhoea*) have evolved to colonise and invade different anatomical sites of the human body, they are strongly related and share extensive amount of genetic, immunochemical and other biological properties. They are believed to have evolved from a common ancestor, a view strongly supported by the recently released respective genomic sequence data. The outer membrane structure of the two organisms are very similar with a vast number of outer membrane proteins, including some vaccine candidates, being virtually identical. Recent data suggest that vaccines based on conserved (cross-reactive) immunogenic proteins may protect against both organisms.

The mechanisms responsible for the development of natural immunity

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to meningococcal disease remain unclear and the currently available capsular polysaccharide (CPS)-based vaccines provide only serogroup-specific and short-lived protection and are not effective in children under two years of age. Additionally, the CPS of serogroup B meningococci, which are responsible for the majority of cases in Europe and America, is only very poorly immunogenic in humans, generating mainly IgM antibodies.

Recovery from meningococcal infection is followed by long lasting immunity and, in the absence of immunodeficiencies, second episodes of meningitis (with homologous or heterologous strains) are extremely rare. This fact indicates that there are non-capsular (cross-reactive) antigens that can stimulate T-cell memory and thus generate a long-lasting and cross-protective immunity.

To achieve an efficient humoral immune response resulting in the production of high affinity IgG antibodies and the generation of memory B lymphocytes (B-cells), help from T lymphocytes (T-cells) is required. However, helper T-cells respond to peptide antigens associated with class II molecules of the major histocompatibility complex (MHC - designated HLA in humans) on the surface of antigen presenting cells. Therefore, they will not be stimulated by purified polysaccharide vaccines (T-cell independent B-cell immunogens). To trigger a strong memory T-cell response when the host confronts the virulent organism, the target B-cell epitope should be expressed along with helper T-cell stimulating epitopes. Identification and characterisation of the peptide epitopes that can best stimulate meningococcal specific CD4⁺ T-cells is an important part of the present invention. An ideal meningococcal vaccine must consist of a carefully selected mixture of well-characterised B- and T-cell antigens capable of generating a long lasting immunity.

It appears that meningococcal vaccine candidates will also have the potential to protect against gonococcal disease.

In the following description the term T-cell clone is defined as the

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population of cells which originate from a single T cell.

In a first aspect, the present invention provides a method of generating T-cell lines and clones specific to neisserial proteins, the method comprising isolating peripheral blood mononuclear cells (PBMCs) from the peripheral blood of normal donors and patients recovering from neisserial disease, culturing the PBMCs with neisserial proteins with or without a proliferation stimulant for a prescribed period, stimulating proliferation of T-cell lines and clones which are specific to neisserial proteins, and maintaining same by regular stimulation.

The neisserial proteins are preferably prepared from *Neisseria meningitidis* and/or *Neisseria gonorrhoea* grown under iron restrictions to induce the expression of iron-regulated proteins.

The peripheral blood is preferably obtained from naturally infected patients at different stages of illness. Preferably the stages include an acute stage (on admission), early convalescence (seven days after admission), late convalescence (six weeks after discharge) and after full recovery (3 months and twelve months after discharge).

Preferably the peripheral blood is heparinised or treated with EDTA and the PBMCs may be isolated therefrom by centrifugation.

Preferably the PBMCs are initially cultured in medium containing human serum. Preferably the PBMCs are cultured with the neisserial proteins and Interleukin 2 (IL-2) for a predetermined period. Preferably the predetermined period is 3-10 days and may be 5 days.

Preferably IL-2 stimulates the proliferation of the activated T-cell lines and clones. Preferably the T-cell lines and clones are maintained by weekly stimulation. The stimulation may be provided by proteins in the presence of IL-2 and feeder cells. Preferably the feeder cells are antigen presenting feeder cells and may be autologous Epstein-Barr virus transformed B-lymphocytes

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(EBVB).

The specificity of the T-cell lines and clones to neisserial proteins is preferably tested prior to storing for example in liquid nitrogen. Preferably the specificity is tested by measurement of tritiated thymidine incorporation in response to stimulation with neisserial proteins compared to irrelevant antigens. Such an irrelevant antigen may be tetanus toxoid. The phenotypes of the T-cell lines and clones are preferably also assessed using flow cytometry and specific monoclonal antibodies. The antibodies are preferably CD4⁺, CD8⁻ and α/β - and γ/δ - T-cell receptor (TCR) specific monoclonal antibodies.

In a second aspect the present invention provides a method of detecting CD4⁺ T-cell stimulating proteins, the method comprising fractionating neisserial proteins and testing the ability of said proteins to stimulate proliferation of T-cell lines and clones.

Preferably the T-cell lines and clones are *Neisseria* specific T-cell lines and clones generated according to the method of the first aspect of the invention, as set out above.

The proteins may be fractionated by SDS-PAGE. The fractions are preferably tested for their ability to stimulate the individual T-cell lines and clones. Preferably fractions containing T-cell stimulants are further characterised by SDS-PAGE.

Polyclonal antibodies may be raised to the T-cell stimulating fraction proteins. The antibodies are preferably used to screen a genomic meningococcal and/or gonococcal expression library. Preferably the expression library is a λ ZapII library. Isolated neisserial polypeptides which react with the antibodies and their respective DNA fragments are preferably further characterised and sequenced.

In a third aspect, the present invention provides a method of detecting

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CD4⁺ T-cell stimulating recombinant proteins, the method comprising screening a genomic meningococcal or gonococcal expression library for recombinant proteins which stimulate T-cell lines and clones.

Preferably the T-cell lines and clones are meningococcal and/or gonococcal specific T-cell lines and clones generated according to the method of the first aspect of the invention, as set out above.

Preferably the genomic meningococcal or gonococcal expression library is a λ ZapII phage library expressing genomic DNA extracted from a strain of *Neisseria meningitidis* or a strain of *Neisseria gonorrhoea*. Preferably a representative pool of recombinant pBluescript SKII plasmid are excised from the phage library and transformed into *E.coli* strain XL1-Blue. Preferably the plasmids are excised into XL1-Blue using a helper phage.

The transformed *E.coli* are preferably cultured in a medium which may contain ampicillin. Meningococcal or gonococcal protein expression is preferably induced by isopropyl-b-D-thio-galactoside.

Preferably the bacteria are heat-killed and sonicated before adding to antigen presenting cells. The expressed proteins are preferably tested for their ability to stimulate the individual T-cell lines and clones. Preferably CD4⁺ T-cell stimulating bacterial cultures are identified and subcultured. The subcultures are preferably rescreened for T-cell stimulation.

Preferably the CD4⁺ T-cell stimulants are identified by sequencing and may be further characterised.

Alternatively the genomic meningococcal or gonococcal expression library is a λ ZapII phage library expressing genomic DNA extracted from a meningococcal or gonococcal genomic lambda phage display library.

In a fourth aspect the present invention provides a method of detecting

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CD4⁺ T-cell stimulating peptides, the method comprising screening meningococcal or gonococcal genomic phage display libraries (PDLs) to identify peptides which stimulate T-cell lines and clones.

Preferably the T-cell lines and clones are meningococcal and/or gonococcal specific T-cell lines and clones generated according to the method of the first aspect of the invention, as set out above.

Preferably the genomic phage display library (PDL) is generated by fragmenting bacterial DNA, cloning and packaging into bacteriophage vectors. Preferably two vectors are used. The first vector preferably displays peptides up to 1200 amino acids which are expressed at low copy numbers. The second vector preferably displays up to 415 copies of a peptide up to 50 amino acids in size.

Preferably the PDLs are amplified in respective *E.coli* hosts. The cells are preferably heat killed before testing for the ability of the peptides to stimulate the T-cell lines and clones.

Preferably CD4⁺ T-cell stimulating PDL cultures are identified and subcultured. The subcultures are preferably rescreened for T-cell stimulation.

Preferably the CD4⁺ T-cell stimulants are identified by sequencing and may be further characterised.

In a fifth aspect the present invention provides a method of detecting CD4⁺ T-cell stimulating recombinant proteins, using a meningococcal or gonococcal genomic lambda phage display library in accordance with the third aspect of the invention, as set out above.

The meningococcal or gonococcal genomic lambda phage display library is preferably constructed by cloning randomly amplified PCR products using two random primers, each tagged at 5' end to restriction sites, inserting same

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into a pre-digested vector, and plating by infecting *E.coli*.

Preferably the vector is a lambda phage and is preferably λ prH825 vector. The amplified and digested DNA fragments are preferably packaged into the lambda phage using a lambda phage packaging kit. Preferably the restriction sites are SpeI or NotI.

Preferably the DNA inserts in the plaques formed are sequenced, thereby confirming that the plaques contain DNA fragments of meningococcal or gonococcal origin.

In a sixth aspect the present invention provides the use of a polypeptide in the manufacture of a vaccine against neisserial disease, the peptide comprising an amino acid sequence as shown in SEQIDNO1 and SEQIDNO2 or an active derivative thereof.

Preferably the polypeptide is a CD4⁺ T-cell stimulant.

In a seventh aspect of the present invention there is provided a DNA construct for use in the manufacture of a medicament for the treatment of neisserial disease, the construct comprising a sequence as shown in SEQIDNO3 or an active derivative thereof.

In an eighth aspect the present invention provides the use of a polypeptide in the manufacture of a vaccine against neisserial disease, the peptide comprising an amino acid sequence as shown in SEQIDNO3 and SEQIDNO4 or an active derivative thereof.

Preferably the polypeptide is a CD4⁺ T-cell stimulant.

According to a further aspect, there is provided a DNA construct for use in the manufacture of a medicament for the treatment of neisserial disease, the construct comprising a sequence as shown in SEQIDNO1, or an active derivative

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thereof.

In a still further aspect the invention provides a composition for use as a vaccine against neisserial disease, the composition comprising two peptides with the amino acid sequences as shown in SEQIDNO1 and SEQIDNO2, and SEQIDNO3 and SEQIDNO4 or active derivatives thereof.

In a further aspect of the present invention there is provided a nucleotide sequence comprising a base sequence as shown in SEQIDNO1, or an active derivative thereof, the sequence coding for a polypeptide having an amino acid sequence as shown in SEQIDNO1 and SEQIDNO2, or an active derivative thereof.

In a still further aspect of the present invention there is provided a nucleotide sequence comprising a base sequence as shown in SEQIDNO3, or an active derivative thereof, the sequence coding for a polypeptide having an amino acid sequence as shown in SEQIDNO3 and SEQIDNO4, or an active derivative thereof.

The invention also provides a vaccine against neisserial disease, the vaccine comprising polypeptide with some or all of the amino acid sequence as shown in SEQIDNO2, or an active derivative thereof.

The invention provides a further vaccine against neisserial disease, the vaccine comprising polypeptide with some or all of the amino acid sequence as shown in SEQIDNO4, or an active derivative thereof.

According to a further aspect of the present invention there is provided a method of treatment of neisserial disease, the method comprising inducing T-cell proliferation with polypeptide comprising one or both of the or some of the amino acid sequences shown in SEQIDNO2 and SEQIDNO4, or active derivative(s) thereof.

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The invention also provides a purified and isolated DNA composition comprising the sequence of SEQIDNO1 or SEQIDNO3, or an active derivative thereof.

Embodiments of the invention will now be described by way of example only and with reference to the accompanying drawings and sequences, in which:-

Fig. 1 is a graph illustrating the proliferation responses of peripheral blood mononuclear cells (PBMCs) of three patients and a healthy donor to meningococcal proteins.

Fig. 2 is a graph illustrating the proliferation indices of a T-cell line with fraction (SI-V) of meningococcal proteins separated by SDS PAGE.

Fig. 3 is a graph illustrating the proliferation indices of a T-cell line to subfractions A, B, C and D of section SI in Fig. 2, and also the proliferation index of concanavalin A (Con A) and whole cell lysate of iron-depleted meningococci (SD-).

SEQIDNO1 shows the nucleotide base sequence and the corresponding amino acid sequence of a gene and a polypeptide (TspA) encoded thereby, according to one aspect of the present invention;

SEQIDNO2 shows the polypeptide sequence of SEQIDNO1;

SEQIDNO3 shows the nucleotide base sequence and the corresponding amino acid sequence of a gene and a polypeptide (TspB) encoded thereby, according to another aspect of the present invention; and

SEQIDNO4 shows the polypeptide sequence of SEQIDNO3.

In order to identify meningococcal CD4⁺ T-cell-stimulating peptides we adopted a number of different programmes all of which involve screening meningococcal peptide antigens, using meningococcal-specific CD4⁺ T-cell lines and clones. These lines and clones have been generated over the past five years

or so, from the peripheral blood of normal donors and patients recovering from invasive meningococcal disease. *In-vitro* studies have been carried out with primed human T-cells obtained from naturally infected patients, with fresh peripheral blood samples obtained from patients at different stages of illness, namely the acute stage (on admission), early convalescence (seven days after admission), late convalescence (six weeks after discharge) and after full recovery (3 months and twelve months after discharge). T-cell lines and clones, specific to meningococcal proteins have been generated from the peripheral blood of patients recovering from meningococcal disease and healthy donors. The healthy donors were identified among twenty five volunteers by testing their peripheral blood mononuclear cells (PBMC) proliferation in response to meningococcal proteins.

Lymphocyte proliferation assays:

Briefly, PBMCs were isolated from heparinised blood samples by centrifugation over Histopaque (Sigma). The PBMCs were washed and cultured in 96-well tissue culture plates at 2×10^5 cells/well in RPMI medium containing 10% human AB serum (RPMI-AB). Meningococcal proteins (from strain SD, B:15:P1,16) were prepared by growing the organism under iron restriction, to induce the expression of iron-regulated proteins which are also expressed *in vivo* [Ala'Aldeen, 1994]. The meningococcal proteins (SD-), antigens from *Candida albicans* (a recall antigen) or phytohaemagglutinin (PHA, positive control) were added to quadruplicate wells. RPMI-AB alone (with no antigen) was added to quadruplicate wells to serve as the background. After five days all cultures were pulsed with $1\mu\text{Ci}$ of tritiated thymidine and incorporation of thymidine was determined after another eighteen hours. A positive response was defined as a PBMC proliferation index of at least 2 (see Fig. 1).

Continuous T-cell lines were established by culturing PBMCs with the meningococcal proteins and Interleukin 2 (IL-2) for five days, and activated T-cell blasts were stimulated to proliferate by a further nine days culture with IL-2 only. The lines were then maintained by weekly stimulation with proteins in

the presence of feeder cells and IL-2. Autologous Epstein-Barr virus transformed B-lymphocytes (EBVB) were used as antigen-presenting feeder cells following irradiation (6000R).

T-cell clones are defined here as the population of cells which originate from a single T-cell. Single T-cell receptors (TCRs) can engage with an extraordinary small number of peptide-HLA complexes (<10/cell) [Valitute, 1995], therefore T-cell clones will provide a highly sensitive system by which it will be possible to detect the presence of peptide antigens within mixtures of proteins. T-cell lines, specific to meningococcal antigens, were seeded at 0.3 cell/well in 96-well tissue culture plates in the presence of irradiated (non-proliferating) autologous EBVB feeder cells, plus low doses of IL-2 [Sinigaglia, 1991]. Cell growth was detected microscopically after one-two weeks and growing cells expanded further by stimulation with meningococcal proteins. All T-cell lines and clones were assessed for the phenotype (and ascertained to be CD4⁺ T-cells), using flow cytometry and CD4, CD8 and α/β - and γ/δ - TCR-specific monoclonal antibodies. Their specificity to meningococcal proteins was tested by measurement of tritiated thymidine incorporation in response to stimulation with meningococcal proteins compared to irrelevant antigens e.g. tetanus toxoid. Large numbers of T-cell lines, oligoclones and clones from patients and normal donors have been identified and stored in liquid nitrogen until further use.

T-cell responses to fractionated meningococcal proteins

Meningococcal proteins were fractionated according to their molecular weights by SDS-polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis (SDS-PAGE). Two methods were used to prepare the separated proteins for addition to the T-cell cultures:

- a) Fractionated proteins were transferred onto nitrocellulose membranes which were transversely divided into five equal sections labelled SI-V, containing proteins of approximate molecular weight range >130 kDa, 70-130 kDa, 50-70 kDa, 34-50 kDa and <34 kDa, respectively. Membranes were then

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solubilised with dimethyl sulphoxide and tested for their ability to stimulate T-cells using the established meningococcal specific T-cell lines. Using one of the cell lines, section SI (which contained proteins >130 kDa) caused greater T-cell proliferation than any of the other sections (Fig. 2). T-cell lines fed with either EBV-B-cells or fresh autologous PBMCs consistently gave similar results.

b) In the second method, SDS-gels containing the fractionated proteins were cut into transverse sections corresponding to the five fractions obtained by the nitrocellulose membrane method. The proteins were then directly eluted from the gel sections and purified by precipitation with organic solvents. This enabled measurement of the protein concentrations in each fraction and confirmation that differences in protein concentration were not responsible for the differences observed in Figure 2. Equivalent concentrations of purified proteins were used in lymphocyte proliferation assays. The results were consistent with those of the nitrocellulose membrane blot method (not shown).

Section SI consists of more than 12 proteins as seen on silver stained gels, ranging from 130-599 kDa (not shown). Therefore, it was subdivided into four fractions, FIA-D, and their proteins were eluted from gels as described above. The eluted proteins were tested for their ability to stimulate T-cell proliferation. As shown in Figure 3, using T-cell line of a patient, fractions FIC and D induced extremely high T-cell proliferation indices (≤ 30), higher than fractions FIA and FIB, the whole of SI or the total SD-protein preparation. Another T-cell line showed the highest T-cell stimulation indices with fraction FIB and FIC, followed by FID, possibly reflecting the HLA specific response.

FIC was chosen for further characterisation and silver staining of SDS-gels showed that it contains four distinct protein bands (not shown). Rabbit polyclonal antibodies were raised to eluted FIC proteins and used to screen an already established genomic expression (λ Zap II) library. Several reactive meningococcal polypeptides and their respective DNA fragments were isolated. Two of the most promising ones (TspA and TspB) were further studied. The DNA fragments were sequenced and with help from the Sanger-released

genomic sequences which were produced by the Neisseria Meningitidis Sequencing Group at the Sanger Centre and can be obtained from <ftp://ftp.sanger.ac.uk/pub/AAREADME.release-policy.txt>, the genes encoding these two proteins were then constructed (see SEQIDNO1-4) and cloned into high expression vectors.

TspA, the abbreviation for T-cell stimulating protein A identified and characterised as part of the present invention has a genetic sequence substantially as shown in SEQIDNO1 and a corresponding polypeptide sequence as shown in SEQIDNO2.

TspA can be used to create a vaccine against pathogenic neisseria, and in particular *Neisseria meningitidis*, as well as *Neisseria gonorrhoea*. Determination of the sequence enables the generation of antibodies using general polyclonal and/or monoclonal techniques.

Similarly with TspB (T-cell stimulating protein B), vaccine or a component for a combination vaccine are created using polyclonal and/or monoclonal techniques.

It is envisaged that an effective vaccine will be a combination vaccine comprising a plurality of different antigens including TspA and TspB.

The exact sequences can vary among different isolates of meningococci due to the nature of the organism and its ability to mutate any gene any time. This is a universal problem inherent with any gene of these *Neisseria* organisms. Equivalent genes with homologous sequences exist in *Neisseria gonorrhoea*, as detected on the recently released gonococcal genomic sequence data obtained on the Internet from Oklahoma University, U.S.A.

Western blot experiments on TspA and TspB, using human convalescent sera, confirmed that both proteins are expressed in-vivo and stimulate B-cells following natural infection. The cloned proteins also induced strong CD4⁺ T-

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cell stimulatory effect in our T-cell proliferation assays. These suggested very clearly that they are promising vaccine candidates, and vaccines comprising one or both of these either together or with other proteins are therefore provided as part of this invention.

Finally, fractions FIB and FID, and Section SII and SV which produced net-positive T-cell stimulatory effects may consists of many T-cell stimulatory antigens (Fig. 1 and 3).

Detection of T-cell antigens by phage-expression cloning

The present invention also provides a robust screening system for the identification of CD4⁺ T-cell stimulating recombinant proteins, using an expression cloning protocol, which involves screening genomic meningococcal expression libraries.

1. λ ZapII Expression Library

This method had been successfully applied in other organisms to identify helper T-cell epitopes [Sanderson, 1995; Mougneau, 1995]. Briefly, we used an existing λ ZapII phage library expressing genomic DNA extracted from strain SD N. *meningitidis* [Palmer, 1993 #214]. The library contains 2×10^7 recombinants with an average size of insert of 2.3 kb (range up to 10 kb). A representative pool of recombinant pBluescript SKII plasmid were excised (*in vivo*) from the phage library and transformed into *E. coli* strain XL1-Blue, using ExAssist helper phage (Stratgene) as described previously [Ala'Aldeen, 1996; Palmer, 1993].

Transformed *E. coli* with the pBluescript plasmid carrying meningococcal genes were diluted in selective culture media (containing ampicillin) and put in 96-well microtitre plates at 20-30 transformants/wells. The plates were incubated overnight at 37°C with shaking and replicate cultures were made by splitting the overnight cultures, and the original master plates stored at 4°C.

The splits were grown in epindorfs for 2-3 hours in fresh medium to $OD_{600}=0.3$, then incubated for an additional 2h with 1mM isopropyl- β -D thio-galactoside (IPTG) to induce meningococcal protein expression. Bacteria were heat-killed, sonicated and added to the antigen presenting cells, and tested for their ability to stimulate individual T-cell lines and clones. Negative controls were sonicates of the same *E. coli* strain transformed with pBluescript SKII with no meningococcal DNA insert. Strong T-cell stimulating wells were identified and their corresponding reference wells diluted and subcultured. Up to 100 single colonies (representing single organisms with single plasmids) were isolated and re-screened for T-cell stimulation. Only potent T-cell stimulants were saved and further pursued. This aspect of the present invention proved highly rewarding, and so far two, previously unknown, potent T-cell stimulating meningococcal polypeptides have been identified and further characterised.

2. T-cell antigen detection using phage display libraries (PDL)

Displaying foreign peptides on the surface of bacteriophages is a relatively new but well-established technology. This is different from the normal phage libraries which carry the cloned genes and express and release the proteins inside a host bacterium and not on their own outer coat. In phage display libraries, displayed peptides are encoded as DNA inserts in the structural gene for one of the viral coat proteins and will then appear on the surface of the phage capsid. There are several phage display systems available, each with specific advantages. For example, some are filamentous and others are lytic, some are used as random display libraries (non-specific) which may be used to detect mimotopes, and others are more specific genomic libraries. It is important to note that most phage display libraries have been probed with antibodies in search of specific peptides. A highly novel approach comprising a further aspect of the present invention was developed involving the use of T-cell lines/clones to screen two different meningococcal genomic PDLs to identify good T-cell stimulating peptides.

a) T7Select1 and T7Select415 PDL

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One of the novel lytic bacteriophages is Novagen's T7Select Phage Display System which is easy to use and has the capacity to display peptides up to 1200 amino acids, equivalent to 3.6 kb, with protein molecular weight over 100kDa. Such high molecular weight proteins are usually expressed at low copy numbers by T7Select1. Phage T7Select415, however, is capable of displaying up to 415 copies of a peptide up to 50 amino acids in size. Phage assembly occurs in the *E. coli* cytoplasm and mature phages are released by cell lysis. The latter process occurs within a few hours of infection, which makes the system very rapid. To create a genomic display library, meningococcal DNA will be fragmented to appropriate sizes and cloned and packaged into both T7Select1 and T7Select415 vectors as described in the Novagen's T7Select System manual [Novagen, 1996]. This dual approach allows for the screening for both large and small polypeptides.

A representative population of these PDLs expressing meningococcal proteins are diluted and distributed as oligoclones into 96-well microtitre plates. To each well, appropriate *E. coli* host strains (BL21 for T7Select415 and BLT5403 for T7Select1) will be added to amplify the diluted phage population in these wells. The plates will be split into identical duplicates, one of which will be stored as the reference, and the other heat-killed and tested for the ability to stimulate the T-cell lines/clones as described above for the λ ZAPII library.

b) λ prH825 random meningococcal epitope display library

Another method according to the present invention involves the use of proteins and small peptides on a modified lambda capsid protein D. This protein, which is of 11 kDa with 405 copies expressed as trimers on the phage head [Sternberg, 1995; Mikawa, 1996], is capable of an efficient display of foreign peptides that are fused to its amino- or carboxy-termini [Mikawa, 1996]. This system was successfully used to display a Hepatitis C genomic cDNA library [Alter, 1995] and, more recently, to generate a randomly amplified genomic PDL of known organisms [Lambert, 1993; Kwong-Kowk, 1996; Tomei,

1993]. This involves generating randomly amplified DNA fragments of a known DNA template, using short (random) oligonucleotide primers in polymerase chain reaction (PCR). We have recently constructed a meningococcal genomic lambda phage display library by cloning randomly amplified PCR products into λ prH825 vector, using two random primers, each tagged at 5' end to *SpeI* or *NotI*-restriction sites to facilitate insertion into the predigested vector. Packaging amplified and digested DNA fragments into lambda phage was performed using a lambda packaging kit (Pharmacia Biotech) and plated by infection of the *E. coli* strain BB4. This yielded 5×10^7 plaques, of which a sample of 100 pfu were randomly chosen, and their DNA inserts sequenced. Sequence alignment of the obtained sequence data with those available for *N. Meningitidis* (Sanger, Wellcome) and/or *N. Gonorrhoea*, confirmed that all the chosen plaques contained DNA fragments of meningococcal origin. The fragment sizes ranged from 100-200 bp, representing deduced peptides of up to 60 amino acids long. This PDL was prepared and established in IRBM for use in the identification of CD4⁺ T-cell stimulating recombinant peptides, using the same cloning technique described for the λ ZapII phage system.

Several selection criteria have been adopted to focus the search for relevant, potent and promiscuous T-cell epitopes.

Initially, only candidate peptides, which are likely to contain multiple T-cell epitopes that are immunogenic for CD4⁺ Th-cells (not CD8⁺ T-cells) and presented on MHC class II (HLA-DR, DQ or DP in humans) were studied. Only T-helper (Th) antigens, that bind to a number of widely ranging HLA-types, were selected. It will be determined whether each patient's CD4⁺ Th-response to a candidate meningococcal peptide is due to an established memory Th population (CD45RO⁺) or to activation of naive T-cells (CD45RA⁺). Peptide candidates which activate either the Th2 subset of CD4⁺ T-cell or the Th1 subset are selected. The therapeutic efficacy of both Th1 and Th2-inducing candidate peptides will be evaluated. T-cell clones specific for candidate antigens will be amplified and used to identify the individual T-cell epitopes.

In order to identify and then characterise core epitopes of each candidate peptide, progressively smaller fragments of the DNA will be cloned, expressed and further examined for T-cell stimulation. To define epitopes more accurately, short overlapping peptides representing the defined T-cell stimulating subunits are synthesised and re-examined. Then N- and C-terminal truncated analogs of the most immunogenic peptide fragment are synthesised and tested likewise. Finally, alanine scanning mutational analysis will be employed to identify critical amino acid positions responsible for both TCR contact and HLA-class II contact. Here, a series of peptide analogs of the core epitope identified after N- and C-terminal truncation are synthesised, each with a single alanine substituted at successive amino acid positions, and effects on T-cell immunogenicity and on HLA-binding are assessed [Nelson, 1996]. The isotype of class II HLA molecule restriction specificity will be identified for each T-cell clone by antibody blocking experiments.

As a part of the characterisation of the identified proteins, the diversity of these proteins among various strains of meningococci is studied. A large collection of clinical isolates of meningococci have been prepared, the proteins of these strains when purified (from the gels or clones), and tested for T-cell stimulatory capacity and characterised in a way similar to that used for strain SD will provide further vaccine candidates. Proteins that are expressed in all or more of these strains will be focused on.

Identification of HLA restriction

To determine whether different HLA class II molecules present different parts of individual proteins, one of two methods are used. The protein sub-fragments and their overlapping peptides described above will be tested for their capacity to stimulate T-cell clones generated from different individuals (volunteers or patients). Alternatively, lymphocyte donors will be HLA typed, and the association of responsiveness to particular proteins (or epitopes) and certain alleles of HLA-DR, -DQ or -DP determined.

A central aim is to identify T-cell immunogens of *N. meningitidis* which will stimulate T-cell help for the production of protective anti-meningococcal antibodies. Having identified dominant T-cell antigens amongst the proteins, their ability to stimulate T-cell help for antibody production is investigated *in vivo* in animals and in an *in vitro* immunisation system which has been established and optimised in our laboratories [Davenport, 1992]. Protein fragments or peptides that stimulate T-cells from individuals covering a range of HLA types are studied for the presence of B-cell epitopes. If the protein contains B-cell epitopes then antibodies from individuals naturally immune to meningococcal disease should recognise these proteins in immunoblots or ELISA. If no B-cell epitopes are recognised then the identified T-cell epitopes will be conjugated to previously characterised B-cell immunogens such as the meningococcal capsular polysaccharides, the class (1, 2/3) proteins, the transferrin binding proteins ... etc.

Whilst endeavouring in the foregoing specification to draw attention to the features of the invention believed to be of particular importance it should be understood that the Applicant claims protection in respect of any patentable feature hereinbefore referred to and/or shown in the drawings whether or not particular emphasis has been placed thereon.